

Utility Trenches: Safe Entry, Safe Exit

COMPANY

PROJECT

DATE

PRESENTED BY

Digging utility trenches puts crews near buried lines, falling soil, and cave-in hazards. Before anyone enters, we need cave-in protection, a safe way out, and control of soil and equipment near the edge. A trench that looked safe earlier may need another inspection after conditions change.

Check before digging or entering

- Before excavation starts, determine the estimated locations of buried utilities. Contact utility companies or owners to have their lines located. As digging approaches an estimated location, determine the exact location using safe, acceptable methods.
- Keep exposed utility lines protected, supported, or removed as needed while the trench stays open. Report a line that appears damaged or unsupported.
- The competent person responsible for trench inspections must inspect before work, daily, and as needed during the shift. Another inspection is required after every rainstorm or other event that increases hazards. These inspections apply when workers may be exposed.

Protect against cave-ins

- Workers need an adequate cave-in protective system unless the excavation is entirely in stable rock, or is less than 5 feet deep and the competent person finds no sign of a possible cave-in. Shallow does not automatically mean safe.
- Protection may use sloped sides, supports, or a trench shield. A shield is a protective structure around the work area. Systems based on manufacturer data must follow its specifications, recommendations, and limits.
- Supports must be installed and removed without exposing workers to cave-ins, collapsing structures, or falling support pieces. Workers also need cave-in protection when entering or leaving the area protected by a shield.

Keep a safe way out

- In trenches 4 feet deep or deeper, provide a stairway, ladder, ramp, or other safe exit. Workers must not have to travel more than 25 feet along the trench to reach it.
- Before entering, check where the exit is and whether the route is clear. As utility work moves, check that the exit still serves the work area.
- Structural ramps used by workers must be designed by a competent person. Do not improvise a ramp from loose pieces.

Control the edge and report changes

- Keep spoil piles—the soil dug out—and equipment at least 2 feet from the edge, or use retaining devices that prevent them from falling or rolling in. Use both where necessary.
- Loose soil or rock on trench walls also needs control. Remove loose material, use protective barriers, or provide equivalent protection. Do not work above others on sloped walls unless those below are protected from falling material.
- Report falling soil, changing conditions, or damaged protection. If the competent person finds a hazardous condition, exposed workers must leave the area until precautions make it safe.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

After rain, you arrive to install utility pipe. Soil has slipped toward the edge, and the ladder is farther along the trench than before. What would you check and report before entering?

Questions for the crew

1. When does a shallow trench still need cave-in protection?
2. What are the exit requirements for a trench 4 feet deep or deeper?
3. How do we keep spoil piles and equipment from falling into the trench?
4. What must happen after rain before workers are exposed again?

Before entering a trench, check the inspection, cave-in protection, safe exit, and edge conditions.

Sources: 29 CFR 1926.651, Specific excavation requirements; 29 CFR 1926.652, Requirements for protective systems

Drafted with AI for review by a competent person. Clever Rook writes from the official regulation text it cites, but it doesn't know your site. Check it against your conditions and your company's safety program before use. Not legal advice.

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REVIEWED BY (COMPETENT PERSON)

REVIEW DATE

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